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ABSTRACT

A classroom activity to facilitate the process of forming images in the mind (seeing) while writing is described in detail. The activity, called the Where Exercise, consists of the instructor naming a series of locations and the students writing down three objects which they "see" in each of those locations. It is emphasized that the instructor's coaching during the activity is crucial to its success. The activity is intended to be reinforced by a writing assignment based on the images "seen" in one of the locations. Several examples are offered of sample locations and appropriate coaching responses. The article concludes with a list of reasons why the activity is effective. A seven-item bibliography of references is included. (DC)

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# THE WHERE EXERCISE: SEEING IN WRITING

Robert Lawrence

The sensory image gives life to poetry and fiction. Imagery is also vital to expository writing; many, if not most, of the best essays rely extensively upon sensory details.

Seeing is the process of forming images in the mind (Because images invoke all of the senses, I prefer seeing to visualization. We often extend the verb to see beyond the merely visual--I see what you mean, I can see Herb as a millionaire).

Since imagery is important, seeing is important. Indeed, by training students in seeing, we can help them become better writers and better readers. This article focuses on a classroom experience designed to facilitate seeing in writing. But given the intimate connection between writing and reading, a few words on the latter would be appropriate.

Many students (and no doubt many critics) read literary works without seeing the imagery, or at best seeing it very sketchily. These readers need a directive: Picture what you read; see it as clearly and intensely as you can. Seeing is an ever deepening process. It moves from simple sights into whole actions, into the feelings and motivations of characters. Vivid seeing provides the basis of a perceptive esthetic experience, for along with seeing comes conceptualization (insight!) about structure and meaning. Put less rhapsodically, where there is "strong seeing," students more readily enjoy what they are reading, can more easily grasp what's happening in that reading, and are better able to answer essay and exam questions.

The best way to develop seeing is by having students experience the process. As a tutor in the Learning Assistance Center, I have gone over poems line by line and stories sentence by sentence, demanding that students see what is happening. Works that were virtually random strings of words assume shape and meaning.

> I have measured out my life with coffeespoons;
> I know the voices dying with a dying fall
> Beneath the music from a farther room.
>
> Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
> And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
> Of lonely men in short-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...

Clearly seen, these lines become two real, and very different,

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places, thus helping the reader to understand the complex personality of Mr. Prufrock in T.S. Eliot's poem "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock." Seeing also aids in the comprehension of "content" areas. A concrete example can render accessible an abstract principle of Schopenhauer or Piaget.

The Where Exercise is an effective, easily administered classroom activity for developing seeing in writing. Other instructors have successfully used this activity after a single workshop or a good explanation (which I hope to provide here). Obviously most applicable to English classes, the exercise can be used in any class concerned with writing or the nature of perception.

The original Where Exercise is a theatre game from Viola Spolin's Improvisation for the Theatre. The improvisational stage uses almost no props, requiring its actors to mime objects in order to create the reality of place. In the Where Exercise, Spolin would read a list of 20 places and ask her student-actors to write down three objects commonly found in each place. I adapted the exercise for the classroom by heightening the perceptual demands, structuring the readback, and adding instructional coaching. In developing the coaching, I am indebted to John Schultz's Story Workshop method of teaching writing.

The instructor begins the Where Exercise with a simple definition of seeing--picturing something in the mind as clearly as you would in a dream. "As you sit here, you can 'see' another place--your room at home, your car, your favorite tavern." The instructor states that seeing is important in descriptive writing, then introduces the exercise. "I'm going to name a place. I'd like you to picture the place in your mind. Then write down three objects that you see in the place. Make sure you see the objects; don't write something down just because you know it should be there. See it...The first place... a jail...A jail... It might be a jail you've actually visited, or maybe one from a movie, or perhaps a jail you're seeing now for the first time. Write down three objects that you see there."

The instructor's coaching is crucial to the success of the Where Exercise. Remember, students are not accustomed to this type of classroom activity, and for years television and the silver screen have been providing images for them. (A professor of mine once remarked that Elizabethan theatergoers would see Shakespeare's rich imagery, enabling them to go beyond the limits of the Globe Theatre and create palaces, battlefields and far off kingdoms.) Besides encouraging vivid seeing, coaching keeps the instructor involved in the exercise, adding his/her energy to the imaginative flux.

When the students are finished with the jail, the instructor gives the second place, a basement. Below are the second through fifth places with typical coachings.

| | |
|---|---|
| basement | Trust the sight. It will give you everything. |
| | If you've already written down three objects, see what else is there. |
| cave | Use your imagination! (In response to the remark "I've never been in a cave before.") |
| | Look around, there's plenty there--trust the sight. (Don't be afraid to repeat a coaching.) |
| boxcar | Let your eye roam around the place. |
| child's bedroom | You might see many objects. Be aware of the objects that take your attention. Let the object choose you. |

Now it's time for the first readback. "We're going to share responses," says the instructor. "When you hear an object from someone else's place, try to see it. It may fit into your place and change the sight you have. Or it may give rise to a whole new sight." Logistics of the readback vary from instructor to instructor. To get everyone involved right away, I ask each student for his/her jail objects, going around the room in order. (A circular or semi-circular seating arrangement works best.) Then I vary the response pattern: half the class, the other half, volunteers, selected readers, combinations thereof.

Coaching during the readback serves a dual purpose: it deepens the overall concentration and draws connections between seeing and writing. Following are coaching tips for the readback.

| | |
|---|---|
| jail | Some students will give people as objects--guards, prisoners. If it happens only once, fine, for it shows how we view people as objects. But if a student consistently writes down people, the instructor should direct him/her to the demands of the exercise. The same goes for words like darkness, coolness. |
| basement | Instructor can ask the class whether they notice any difference between jail and basement responses. Basement objects are usually more varied. |
| cave | A dreamlike place. There will be bears and bats. Instructor can point out that certain places, like caves, have symbolic meanings for us. |

| | |
|---|---|
| boxcar | Objects often suggest a story line. When this happens in any of the places, instructor can point it out. |
| child's bedroom | Objects here--Pampers, Mickey Mouse wallpaper--usually establish the place very well. A good time to point out how well chosen objects--the concrete detail--can create a sense of place <u>in writing</u>. |
| all of the places | Instructor must see objects along with the class. By occasionally responding to a striking object--"I can really see that"--instructor provides positive feedback and encourages students to realize that some details are more evocative than others. Instructor can also ask class which objects in a particular round made them see the most. |

The Where Exercise continues with five new places. The rules now change a little. "The first two objects should be objects that take your attention right away," says the instructor. "Let the third object be one that you don't notice right away--a surprise object. For instance, in the classroom here, I might notice the eraser and the fluorescent lights right away, and the ventilator grill after looking around." The five new places are:

dormitory room
hospital room
attic (or bathroom)
mine
tower

New coachings are added to the repertoire:

Look around for that third object. Let it surprise you.

You might vary your distance from the place. See it up close. Then pull back and see it from a distance. Notice how this affects the sight.

Seeing is a kind of concentrating and letting go at the same time. And that's how this kind of writing works too.

During the readback, point out that <u>both</u> obvious and unexpected objects can create a sense of place.

As the exercise progresses, so should the level of concentration and so does the demand. For the third set of places, the instructor asks for two objects seen right away, one surprise object, <u>plus</u> a close-in sound and a far-off sound (e.g. a creaking chair vs. echoing voices fading in the hallway). The places, limited to four, are:

treehouse
tavern (one student's surprise object--"my mother")
saloon
greasyspoon restaurant

During the readback for these places, the instructor asks students giving vague sound responses to be more specific: "What kind of music is playing, what noise do the cards make, etc."

For the final set of places, the instructor chooses two or more from the following, depending on time:

movie theatre
dentist's office
alley
drugstore
supermarket
church

I have experimented with further perceptual demands: an odor, a texture, a gesture, a line of dialogue.

More important than the exact demands of the final set of places--leave this to the ingenuity of the reader--is what happens to the Where Exercise after class is over. Ask for a piece of writing, not a catalogue of perceptions, but good prose. Tell the students to choose the place that interested them the most, challenged them the most. "See it again at home. Be aware of even more: other objects; colors; the time of day; the temperature; the lighting, the mood, people--who they are, what they're saying, their histories. Go right to whatever takes your attention and start writing. Let your pen move. Don't worry about spellings--you can check those when you proofread. You can write an essay, a story, a fantasy. Whatever, see the place while you write, and get all that good physical detail into the writing."

The Where Exercise is effective for a number of reasons:

1. It demonstrates the importance of sensory detail in descriptive writing.

2. It establishes the role of seeing in generating sensory detail. (1 and 2 do come across. When I ask students in quizzes to define seeing and state why it is important, I'm always impressed by the high percentage who answer correctly.)

3. It is flexible. The exercise is suitable for developmental, fresh composition, or creative writing classes. Designed for an hour and fifteen minutes class, it is easily adapted to a 50 minute class simply by using fewer places.

4. It provides for a lively and interesting classroom session.

5. Students gain confidence in expressing themselves imaginatively--especially students who are weak in grammar and worried about making mistakes.

6. Writing stemming from the exercise is often excellent.

7. There is carryover into subsequent assignments, including expository writing.

8. The exercise is not "fixed"; the instructor can experiment with new places and perceptual demands.

Finally, the Where Exercise has a sound physiological basis. Recent research has shown that the two halves of the human brain process information in two different--and equally important--methods. The right hemisphere is intuitive and holistic, grasping overall patterns and structures. It is responsible for the formation of images. The left hemisphere is logical and analytic, grasping linear sequences. It is responsible for the formation of words. According to researcher Joseph Bogen, "Learning of almost any idea is likely to be better if both methods are used" (McCarthy, 1980, p. 73). Our educational system tends to ignore the right hemisphere. By joining seeing and writing, the Where Exercise blends the two hemispheres' modes of thinking.

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